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Queen Elizabeth to visit Pope Francis at Vatican on April 3

by Simon Caldwell by Catholic News Service

Manchester, England — The Queen of England will visit Pope Francis at the Vatican in April, Buckingham Palace announced.

A Feb. 4 statement said Queen Elizabeth II and her husband, Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh, will meet the pope on April 3.

The queen and prince will visit Rome at the invitation of Italian President Giorgio Napolitano, the statement said.

It said the royal couple would attend a private lunch hosted by the president at the presidential palace, then would have an audience with the pope at the Vatican.

The 87-year-old queen, who has reigned since 1952, was the first British sovereign to welcome a pope to England when she greeted Blessed Pope John Paul II in London in 1982.

In 2010, Queen Elizabeth also welcomed Pope Benedict XVI to Britain when he arrived in Edinburgh, Scotland, on the first stop of a tour that concluded with the beatification of Blessed John Henry Newman.

The visit to Rome will be the first overseas trip for the royal couple for three years, a period in which Prince Philip, 92, has been troubled by ill health.

The queen is the constitutional head of the British state and is also the supreme governor of the Church of England.

The London-based Daily Mail newspaper, which broke the story ahead of the announcement by Buckingham Palace, speculated that the royal visit would strengthen ties between the Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion.

It also said Pope Francis would not receive the queen and the duke in the Vatican state apartments but in the three modestly furnished rooms that the pontiff occupies in the Domus Sanctae Marthae guesthouse.

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